

Long Island Business NEWS

Where Business Gets Down To Business

Cyberspace: the next frontier for building business

By Claude Solnik
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Ask Michael T. Hanley the secret to getting testimonials and he'll tell you it's doing good work. But he also wielded a not-so-secret weapon, LinkedIn, to assemble all of the gushing comments in an easy, informal way.

Hanley, managing partner at Smithtown-based accounting firm Merl & Hanley, accumulated dozens of such raving reviews from happy customers primarily through Mountain View, Ca.-based LinkedIn, a social networking site designed for business people.

LinkedIn, which claims 17 million users worldwide, creates pages for people including information about them as well as names of others in their network. Viewers to one person's page can then "link" with people in that network.

"This isn't networking - it's what networking should be," LinkedIn touts on its site.

While that may be an overstatement, LinkedIn can be an easy way to make or deepen connections. Even those who don't use it for business are being asked to join people's networks.

"Everybody's in it," said Gladys Ahrens, vice president of administration for Garden City-based benefits and risk management firm Chernoff Diamond and Co. "It's amazing how many people have sent me invitations from it."

And LinkedIn is not alone. Facebook is a popular networking site where individuals set up pages, and until recently, solely the domain of high school and college students.

Dorset, England-based Lush Fresh Handmade Cosmetics set up an elaborate Facebook page with testimonials and connections to causes such as global warming. The Middlebury College bookstore in Middlebury, Vt., set up a Facebook page complete with testimonials tips on saving money on textbooks targeting the nearly 7,000 Middlebury students, faculty and alumni.

"It's a paradigm shift in the way we're doing business," said Bob Jansen, Middlebury's bookstore manager. "It shifts sales from a customer-driven approach to a relational-based approach. Instead of being customers, they're now my friends."

Friendship-building aside, LinkedIn, a plain vanilla site that strictly targets business people, is the go-to site for business connections.

Gordon Tepper, Melville-based Marcum & Kliegman's public relations coordinator, sees professional benefits to LinkedIn.

“(Professionals) populate the page with their work experience, skills and can have some communication with colleagues and people from other places they’ve worked with,” Tepper said.

Individuals can build their network quickly by letting LinkedIn cull their e-mails and invite senders to join their network.

Business people can benefit by accumulating connections and recommendations tabulated by LinkedIn. Hanley got about four inquiries and two clients from the site.

“I got calls from business owners looking for an accountant,” he said. “They saw I’m high in rankings on LinkedIn in terms of number of connections and number of recommendations.”

But even Hanley uses LinkedIn more to deepen connections than to meet new people.

Tepper is looking at how to harness LinkedIn and other sites. “We’re still trying to figure out the best way to tap into these new media opportunities,” he said. “LinkedIn seems like a nice way to maintain relationships with many contacts.”

Nobody thinks online networking replaces the real thing. So don’t throw away those business cards just yet.

Hanley, also president of the Irish American Business Network, a networking group for Irish business owners and professionals, believes being there’s still best.

“You build stronger connections face-to-face,” Hanley said. “You can find common interests outside the business world that will help you do more business with that person.”

Also, online networking can’t duplicate the appeal of randomly running into people in a room.

“It’s hard to bump into someone on LinkedIn and develop a good relationship,” Hanley said. “[With] face-to-face networking, you can walk into a room with 50 strangers and walk out with 10 or 15 people you might end up doing business with,” proving that there’s no cyber substitute for the old-fashioned handshake.